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JOURNAL SENTINEL

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2017 JSOnline.com PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

BLACKOUT | A JOURNAL SENTINEL WATCHDOG UPDATE

Handling of deaths scrutinized

State Department faces inquiry over Mexico response

Raquel Rutledge Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

The U.S. Office of Inspector General has opened an inquiry into how the State Department has been handling injuries and deaths related to potentially tainted alcohol in Mexico.

In a letter to Republican U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, Inspector General Steve Linick said his office will examine the policies and procedures the department has been using in responding to these cases.

"Once we have assessed that information we will determine whether additional work is warranted," Linick wrote in the letter dated Tuesday.

Johnson, chairman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, called on the Inspector General to investigate in October, after dozens of people told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel they had been robbed, sexually assaulted and otherwise injured after consuming alcohol while vacationing at all-inclusive resorts around Mexico.

Some reported having just one or two drinks before blacking out and being victimized. Numerous people reported blacking out simultaneously with a friend or spouse.

Family members also told of how loved ones drowned in resort pools.

Of the action by the Inspector General, Ginny McGowan said, "That's wonderful, that's great. It's better than what we've been hearing and getting in terms of denial and nobody taking responsibility."

McGowan is the mother of Abbey Conner, the 20-year-old from Pewaukee who drowned at the Iberostar Paraiso del Mar pool while on a family vacation in January.

Conner and her older brother, Austin, had been drinking tequila at the resort's swim-up bar for less than two hours before dinner with their mother and stepfather on the first night of their trip. They were found unconscious in the pool around 7 p.m.

Austin survived but suffered a severe concussion and doesn't recall what happened. Abbey was brain dead and

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BURNED | A JOURNAL SENTINEL WATCHDOG REPORT

Outside embattled barrel-refurbishing plants, exploding drums have killed or maimed dozens

Jon Rygiel's cutting torch had barely pierced the top of a 55-gallon steel drum when it exploded with a blast that nearly killed him on March 12, 2015, at Greener Acres Transmissions in Cadott. RICK BARRETT/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

'Once you get an ignition source, boom'

Rick Barrett Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

On a blustery March afternoon, Jon Rygiel was outside his family's business in Cadott, cutting the lid off a 55-gallon steel drum to make a trash barrel.

The 24-year-old mechanic was tidying up the shop, Greener Acres Transmissions, instead of heading out to collect maple syrup as he had planned.

As his cutting torch flame punched a tiny hole in the sealed drum's lid, it ignited oil fumes trapped inside.

An explosion sent the lid sailing across the street and the torch handle flying into Rygiel's head, tearing an 8-inch gash in the side of his head. The blast was heard across the town of about 1,500 people in Chippewa County.

The heat from the flames melted his safety glasses.

The March 12, 2015, accident left Rygiel in a coma for more than a month and living in medical care facilities for more than a year.

It wasn't as uncommon as it might seem.

Just weeks ago, on Nov. 17, it happened to a cheese plant employee in Rosendale while he was cutting a drum in the plant's vehicle shop. And it happened in March 2013 to a mechanic in Hudson, who had nearly every bone in his face broken.

There was the construction company employee in Richmond, Texas. The farm worker in Woodburn, Ore. The welder, with 30 years of experience, in Elkhart, Ind.

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A UPS driver found Wang on the shop floor in a pool of blood. Police found Wang's blood on the ceiling, his broken safety glasses, the bent cutting torch and the crumpled top of the 55-gallon steel drum.

Since his accident, Chad Wang has found work as a welder and spends much of his time with his wife, Jill, and children Ellie, 8, Calvin, 5, and Kennedy, 11. RICK WOOD/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Bucks will tap into world of online gaming

NBA 2K eSports league to have Milwaukee team

James B. Nelson Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

The Milwaukee Bucks are launching a new team, this one hoping to tap into the exploding world of online gaming.

The Bucks on Thursday morning will announce the Bucks Gaming team as the NBA begins a big publicity push to support the new NBA 2K eSports league, which will begin play in spring.

"The NBA 2K League provides a great opportunity for the Bucks to further engage the global basketball and gaming audience," said Wes Edens, Bucks co-owner and chairman of the NBA's e-Sports committee.

"The way fans experience and interact with sports is rapidly evolving and eSports are at the forefront of innovation," Edens said. "We are excited to be one of the founding teams of the 2K League as we enhance our organization by adding another team."

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GOP has tax overhaul deal

President expects to sign final version next week

Herb Jackson, Deirdre Shesgreen and Eliza Collins
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – Republicans in Congress announced Wednesday that House and Senate leaders have reached a deal on how to overhaul the tax code, but Democrats are already using Doug Jones' upset victory in Tuesday's Alabama Senate election to argue Congress needs to slow down the tax bill.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, confirmed the agreement ahead of a lunch meeting that Republican members of a House-Senate conference committee held at the White House with President Donald Trump.

See TAXES, Page 7A

Local
County Executive Chris Abele makes a last-minute appeal for a wheel tax. **3A**

Sports
Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers is confident as he returns to the field. **1B**

Weather
High 29° Low 15°
Partly cloudy. **4C**

Volume 136 | Issue 29
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